



"Leadership in Public School Governance"

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WASB Testimony Against Common Core Senate Bill

TO: Members of the Senate Committee on Education
FROM: Dan Rossmiller, WASB Government Relations Director
RE: OPPOSITION to Senate Bill 619, relating to creating a model academic standards board
DATE: March 6, 2014

Good afternoon Senator Olsen and members of the Senate Committee on Education. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 619. My name is Dan Rossmiller and I am the Government Relations Director for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB).

The WASB strongly opposes Senate Bill 619. The bill will eliminate the Common Core State Standards that were voluntarily adopted in Wisconsin in 2010, more than three and a half years after Wisconsin had begun the process of revising its existing math and reading standards.

Since 2010, Wisconsin school districts have spent time, energy and money—an estimated \$25 million, according to the non-partisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau—to implement the Common Core Standards, money and hard work that will have to be set aside if this proposal advances in its present form and results in replacement of the Common Core Standards.

We find it curious that lawmakers who so often preach frugality and fiscal conservatism have been so quick to urge that the Common Core Standards be scrapped. If new standards are adopted, the costs of implementing these reinvented standards, including training teachers and staff and reviewing curriculum and instructional materials, will fall on districts. Because all districts are subject to revenue limits, money spent on implementing new, reinvented standards will subtract from what districts can do in other areas. In districts, that receive little or no state general aid, this cost will be heavily or wholly borne by property taxpayers, not the state.

Scrapping implementation of the Common Core will move districts back to square one. Many school districts have just purchased materials to meet the Common Core Standards. We wonder if those lawmakers who urge repeal of the Common Core Standards will please come to these school districts to explain to the taxpayers that they now need a referendum to buy materials to replace the newly purchased materials bought to implement the Common Core Standards or, for that matter, to explain why programs and staff will have to be cut if the referendum doesn't pass.

Even after a set of exhaustive legislative hearings around the state at which critics had ample opportunity to question the Common Core Standards, there is widespread agreement that: a) these new standards are more rigorous than the ones they replace, b) these new standards specify what students should know and be able to do at every grade level, whereas prior state standards set learning targets only in grades 4, 8 and 12; and c) there is great value in being able to benchmark the achievement level of Wisconsin students against students in other states and districts across the country.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the debate around the Common Core Standards is the extent to which opposition is based not on the content of the standards themselves—what they actually expect students to know and do—but rather on things that have nothing to do with the content, such as the federal government's perceived role in getting states to adopt them and the mistaken perception that somehow local control has been lost in the shuffle.

These arguments are little more than red herrings.

Curriculum and standards are NOT the same thing. Standards are a set of expectations about what students should know and be able to do at a given grade level. They are an over-arching set of goals that may be reached in a number of ways. Curriculum is the material and teaching methods used to meet the standard. There is more than one way to teach students to master the goals set forward in the standards.

Benchmarks are established to measure how well students are meeting the goals and expectations set forward in the standards. Benchmarks are assessed in a step by step process so we know whether and how well students are mastering these expectations.

The instructional materials used to bring students to mastery of the goals are the product of a locally-controlled decision, approved by local school boards who reflect local community values and district mission statements.

Decisions about curriculum and the instructional materials (including books) used in our schools remain with the local school board, where those decisions have always resided. We don't have a list of required books in our state; we have never had such a list--not under the Common Core or before the Common Core.

The selection of a curriculum to help student meet the Common Core Standards is a local decision. In a typical district, school administrators reviewed the Common Core Standards, examined many materials and assessed how these materials would help to match student outcomes to the standards. Then they very carefully selected materials to recommend to the Board of Education following a long process of examination and evaluation. Administrators presented the materials to the Board of Education. The Board approved the selections. Ideally, the materials support the curriculum, and the curriculum supports the standards. A curriculum isn't one specific book, or one specific topic that is taught. It is a compilation of materials put together to meet the set of expectations for achievement reflected in the standards.

Thoughtful people across our state, including key business leaders, recognize that it is important that school districts be able to assess their students' performance via the Common Core and its associated tests because they provide both a set of academic standards that are far more rigorous than our prior standards, and equally important, a set of benchmarks against which Wisconsin students' performance can be credibly and accurately compared with that of their peers nationwide.

These business leaders recognize that in today's global economic competition it is critical that, in their words, we keep our "state from going backwards in a way that would once again make Wisconsin an island in terms of nationwide relevance or the comparability of its academic standards and student performance to those in other states." They not only know how critical a well-educated workforce is to providing the fuel for our state's economy, they know how important the quality of our state's workforce—and our ability to quantify that quality to prospective businesses who may be interested in locating jobs in our state—is in allowing our state to compete nationally and internationally for new jobs and business.

For too long, our state's ability to assess its own student's performance and to measure it against that of students in other relevant states has been hampered by our reliance on standards and test results that cannot be accurately compared to other state's results.

The Common Core and the tests aligned to it solve this problem. With the Common Core and aligned tests in place Wisconsin will be able to instantly compare the progress of its students with those in at least 45 other states and the District of Columbia in a meaningful and accurate fashion. All of this will be lost if Senate Bill 619 passes and lawmakers substitute their own standards for the Common Core standards developed by educators.

It should be noted that the wide array of reforms Wisconsin's public schools are being subjected to by this very Legislature—from report card grading systems to rigorous teacher and principal evaluations to new state testing systems—are all integrated with and aligned to the Common Core academic standards.

Current law, reflected in 2013 Wisconsin Act 20 (the 2013-15 state budget act), funds the implementation and use of statewide assessments aligned to the Common Core Standards. Nothing in Senate Bill 619 changes this. However, if Senate Bill 619 passes in its current form and is enacted, the state's assessments will be aligned to the Common Core Standards while its academic standards likely will not. In other words, what teachers teach and what students learn will not be what is tested nor will it be what teachers are evaluated on or what schools are graded on the report card. That is a ridiculous and untenable situation.

Scrapping the Common Core Standards will either mean that the state's standards will be misaligned to its student assessments or it will require the state to write its own state assessments—with no guarantee that they will be online or adaptable to individual students' needs or align with college and career-readiness. Further, while we know it will cost multiple millions of dollars to produce new assessments we have no idea how long it would take to get them ready or test them before they are used for high-stakes consequences. In any event, scrapping the Common Core send the state (and local districts) back to square one with regard to replacing the WKCE exams, something we fervently hope to avoid.

Scrapping the Common Core and its aligned assessments would force each district's teacher and principal evaluations and school report cards to be based on standards that are not yet known and a test that hasn't even been developed yet, and, in fact, have no idea when such tests will be ready. If you wonder why school leaders are concerned, here is your answer.

Senate Bill 619, to use an old phrase, would "throw the baby out with the bath water."

School boards across the state are deeply troubled that well into the implementation of both the Common Core and these reforms, the Legislature has set its focus on setting up a process that would

allow it—the Legislature—to substitute its own judgment about what the state’s academic standards should be, not just related to English language arts and math, but with respect to social studies and science and other subjects as well.

In place of the Common Core Standards this bill would put in place a highly-political process for creating academic standards that will subject the standards-setting process to all kinds of political squabbling, including over divisive issues such as climate change, evolution vs. creationism, etc. and create yet another disruption at a time when public schools are already attempting to adapt to all the reforms being imposed on them by the state (e.g., report card accountability, educator effectiveness, response to intervention, etc.).

Senate Bill 619 would create a new model academic standards board dominated by political appointees to develop and new model academic standards. The bill would then require the newly-created board to submit proposed model academic standards in English, reading, and language arts and in mathematics to the state superintendent within 12 months of the enactment of the bill.

If it weren’t the intent of the bill to get rid of the Common Core Standards there would be no reason for such a provision. What other reason could there be?

While some will argue that Senate Bill 619 will not lead to the immediate replacement of Common Core, it will surely lead to the replacement of the Common Core within roughly 12 months, plus the few months it will take the DPI to review the board’s recommendations, hold the required public hearings and the time it will take the Legislature to object to the State Superintendent’s recommendations and then pass a bill overturning those recommendations and substituting its own version of academic standards.

By the very terms of the bill, SB 619 will allow politicians, not educators, to write academic standards.

How, you ask? The answer is in the process the bill sets up.

Under the bill, after the newly-created board has submitted its proposed model academic standards to the state superintendent, the state superintendent must, taking into consideration the academic standards submitted by the board, submit its own proposed model academic standards first to the legislative council staff for review and comment and then to the Joint Committee for Review of Administrative Rules (JCRAR), a legislative committee comprised of members from both houses.

The JCRAR must either approve the proposed model academic standards or object to the proposed standards. If JCRAR approves the model academic standards, the state superintendent must adopt the model academic standards. If JCRAR objects to the proposed model academic standards, JCRAR must prepare a bill that incorporates by reference the proposed model academic standards submitted by the board for introduction in both the senate and the assembly.

In short, the bill allows the JCRAR to substitute its judgment for that of the state superintendent. The state superintendent thus is placed in the position where he or she must either accept “whole cloth” the recommendations of the board created by this bill or risk the legislature totally rewriting the standards. That is because once a bill is introduced by the JCRAR in support of its objections, any legislator can propose amendments to the bill. Those amendments will allow for politicians to write academic standards, precisely what some proponents of the bill claim will not happen.

This is not just the WASB's opinion. It is shared by the non-partisan Legislative Council attorneys who reviewed the bill. They responded to an inquiry from a legislator with the following plain language analysis:

“You have asked about the provision of the bill requiring the Joint Committee for the Review of Administrative Rules (JCRAR) to introduce a bill that incorporates by reference the model academic standards if JCRAR objects to the standards submitted to it by the State Superintendent. Specifically, you have asked whether the Legislature may amend this bill, if it is introduced. The Legislature would be able to amend such a bill. This conclusion was also reached by Department of Public Instruction (DPI) attorneys who reviewed the bill.” (*February 27, 2014 Legislative Council Memo to Rep. Pope, “Process for Adoption of Model Academic Standards Under 2013 Senate Bill 619”*)

It is by amending this JCRAR bill that the Legislature will be able to write (or re-write) academic standards as it wishes.

Taxpayers have already spent millions of dollars to implement the Common Core Standards which no legislator denies the State Superintendent had the authority to adopt. While some have criticized the State Superintendent and the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) over the process of adopting the standards, arguing that it failed to adequately involve lawmakers or the taxpaying public, the WASB believes that a periodic review process for evaluating any standards adopted by the state, including public hearings throughout the state to ensure standards aren't placed on a “fast track” for adoption can be developed that does not include a legislative veto over such standards or an opportunity for lawmakers to rewrite the standards once they have been adopted.

Delegates to this year's 2014 WASB Delegate Assembly overwhelmingly adopted a resolution (Resolution 14-8) that states (in part), *“The WASB supports adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards at all grade levels in the content areas of English language arts, mathematics, and literacy (in all content areas), which are aimed at placing all Wisconsin students on track to graduate from high school ready for college or careers.”*

That resolution also respects the authority of local school boards to adopt their own additional, more rigorous standards as appropriate. It further states: *“The WASB further supports flexibility for school boards to select, approve and implement local district standards that reflect the local community's expectation that each student achieve his/her maximum potential. The local standards should meet or exceed Common Core State Standards, and should include grade levels and content areas not included in the Common Core State Standards.”*

School board members are looking for a productive, two-way-street state-local partnership. We all need to be working together with the common goal of doing what's best for our children today and our state tomorrow.

I believe I speak for school board members, and I believe the entire education community, when I say: Please, stop with the distractions such as this hastily crafted idea to ‘improve’ the Common Core. Legislative obstacles and uncertainty are detrimental to our mission.

Instead, let's work together to on productive goals such as bringing high speed Internet connections to all our schools and communities – this is the type of help people in Wisconsin need, including and

especially our students and schools. The bill you have before you causes everyone to take their eye off the prize – and that’s a world-class education system with high expectations and measurable outcomes for students and educators. This divisiveness is counterproductive.

Please, we urge you to reject Senate Bill 619.

The Wisconsin Association of School Boards is a nonprofit association that provides information and services to Wisconsin school boards in the areas of school law and policymaking, bargaining, legislation and leadership development.

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